

Doors of the Night—by Frank L. Packard

(Continued from Last Week.)

Copyright, 1935, by George H. Doran Co. (CHAPTER XIII.) Continued.

BILLY KANE appeared to be unmoved. He studied the gangster coldly.

"And how does it happen that you and Birdie, out of all the rest, are picked for this?"

Red Vallon indulged in an ugly grin. "Cause we know the Mole down to the ground," he said. "But principally because the Mole knows us."

There wasn't any feeling when we sprung a show-down, he was wise to that, and he'll come across. And, besides, 'tain't only Birdie and me; I'm taking some of my own gang along as well."

Billy Kane scowled. It probably mattered very little indeed that Red Vallon's efforts were to be sidetracked for the next few hours, and should he, Billy Kane, during that time, be successful, it mattered none at all; but his play for the moment was to preserve his role in Red Vallon's eyes, to keep away from anything intimate concerning the purport of this cipher message that still lay beneath his clenched hand, and that might so easily betray his ignorance, and above all now to get rid of Red Vallon before any such awkward and dangerous impasse could arise. He shrugged his shoulders, but his voice was still sullen as he spoke.

"Well, go to it!" he growled. "Go and pick up your chicken feed! But you get this into your nut, Red, and let it soak there. After this—he leaned far over the table, his face thrust almost into Red Vallon's—your stay with the game every minute, quit! It's the limit, or quit! There's just one thing that counts—those rubies, or the man who pinched them. If we get the man, he'll cough—red—the stones of blood. Do you think I'm going to let anything queer me on my share of half a million? You don't seem to get what I mean when I say the limit. Look out I don't give you an object lesson!"

Red Vallon licked his lips, and drew back a little. There was something in Red Vallon's eyes that was not often there—fear. "It's all right, Bundy," he said with nervous eagerness. "I'm with you. Sure, I am! This thing must have broke loose quick, and there wasn't no idea of catching anything you started. I got ten of the best of 'em cobbling out the 'fences' for you right now."

"All right," responded Billy Kane gruffly. "Make a report to me on that before morning."

"Where'll you be?" Red Vallon was apparently relieved, for his voice had recovered its buoyancy. "At my place—some time," said Billy Kane curtly. "You can wait for me there." He smiled suddenly with grim facetiousness. "My shoulder's a lot better—enough so that maybe I can sit in for a hand myself to-night."

"I hope you do," said Red Vallon fervently. "You always had the knock-out punch, Bundy, and it'll seem like old times." He half rose from his chair; then, looking furtively about him, bent forward over the table. "There's something else, Bundy, before I go—that satchel last night at Jerry's, the man in the mask. He's played hell with the crowd. There's no telling what'll tumble down behind Kardin. And it don't look like he's just stumbled on that deal by accident. It don't look good, Bundy. We got to get him, and get him quick, before he pulls anything more. The word's out to bump him off."

Billy Kane nodded. "Well, don't lose your nerve over it, Red," he said coolly. "If it was by accident, he won't do us any more damage, and we've only got to settle with him for what he's done, providing we can ever find him; if it wasn't accident he'll show his hand again—won't he?"

"Yes," said Red Vallon. "Billy Kane's smile was unpleasant. "Well, you'll know what to do with him then, won't you?" he inquired softly.

The gangster's red-rimmed eyes narrowed to slits. "Yes, I'll know!" said Red Vallon coarsely. He made an ugly motion toward his throat. "Well, so long, Bundy!"

Billy Kane nodded again by way of answer. He watched Red Vallon thread his way back among the tables, and pass out through the front door. With the gangster out of the way, he picked up the sheet of paper upon which the code message was written, studied it for a moment, then thrust it into his pocket—and his glance traveled to the table opposite to him and against the wall, where that slim little figure in black was seated. She appeared to be quite indifferent to his presence, and quite intent upon the consumption of a glass of milk and the sandwich on the plate before her.

Billy Kane smiled with grim comprehension. The fragility of the meal was not without its object. It was fairly obvious that she could dispose of what was before her in short order, and leave the place at an instant's notice without inviting undesirable attention to an unfinished meal—if she so desired! It was his move. She had followed Red Vallon in, but she had not followed Red Vallon out—she was waiting for him, Billy Kane. The seat she had chosen had been in plain view of Red Vallon, therefore she was evidently free from any

fear of recognition on the part of the gangster, and, as a logical corollary, from probably anybody else in the room. That she gave no sign now therefore could mean but one thing. It was his move. If he cared to cross swords with her here, he was at liberty to do so; if he had reasons of his own for preferring a less public meeting, he had only to leave the place—and she would undoubtedly follow.

In one sense she was most solicitous of his welfare; she would do nothing to hamper or hinder him in protecting himself, as long as he continued to double-cross and render abortive the crimes of that inner circle of the underworld in which she believed him to be a leader; failing that, as he had already made it quite clear, she proposed, as near as he could solve the riddle, to expose some past crime of the Rat's to the police, and end his career via the death chair in Sing Sing. Also she had made her personal feelings toward him equally clear—she held for him a hatred that was as deep-seated as the love that was as deadly.

He shrugged his shoulders. He, by proxy, stood in the shoes of one who, seemingly, had done her some irreparable wrong, and since she would dog him all night until she had had the interview that she evidently proposed to have, it might as well be here as anywhere. It mattered very little to him, as the Rat, that he should be observed by those in the room to get up from his table and walk over to hers. He was not being watched in the sense that anyone held surveillance over him, and, in any case, the conventions here in the heart of the underworld were of too elastic a character to have it cause an even comment; and, besides, in a few hours from now, if luck were with him, he would be through with all this, done with this miserable role of super-crook, which, though it brought a new and greater peril at every move he made, was the one thing, for the present, he was dependent upon for his life.

He rose, crossed the room nonchalantly, and dropped into the chair at the end of her table, his back to the door. She greeted him with a smile—but it was a smile of the lips only. The dark eyes, under the long lashes, studied him in a cold, uncompromising stare; and there was mockery in their depths.

A cigarette, pulled lazily from his pocket and lighted, preserved his appearance of unconcern. In spite of himself, in spite of the fact that that contemptuous stare was his only through a damnable and abhorrent proxy, he felt suddenly ill at ease. He had never seen her so closely as this before. He had only seen her twice before—once in the dark, and once with the width of the

Rat's den separating them. He had been conscious then that she was attractive, beautiful, with her clustering masses of brown hair, and the dainty point of her nose, and the pure whiteness of her full throat; but he was conscious now that beyond the mere beauty of features lay steadfastness and strength; that in the sweetness of the face there was, too, a wistfulness, do what she would to hide it, and that there was strain there, and weariness. And he was suddenly conscious, too, that he disliked the role of the Rat more than he had ever disliked it, and that the loathing in those eyes, which never left his face, was responsible for this added distaste of the fact that nature had, through some cursed and perverted sense of humor or malevolence, seem fit to make him the counterpart of a wanton rogue, and worse still, seem fit to force upon him the enactment of that role.

He could not tell her that he was not the Rat, could he?—that he was Billy Kane! Would the loathing in those eyes have grown the less at that? Billy Kane—the thief, the Judas assassin, whose name was a byword throughout the length and breadth of the land at that moment, whose name was a synonym for everything that was vile and hideous and depraved! He was the Rat—until to-night was over! After that—well, after that, who knew? Now, he was the Rat, and he must play the Rat's part.

She broke the silence, her voice cool and even: "I left it entirely to you as to whether you would come over to this table here or not."

"Quite understand!" Billy Kane forced a sarcastic smile. "You are almost too considerate!"

She broke the silence, her voice cool and even: "I left it entirely to you as to whether you would come over to this table here or not."

"Quite understand!" Billy Kane forced a sarcastic smile. "You are almost too considerate!"

She broke the silence, her voice cool and even: "I left it entirely to you as to whether you would come over to this table here or not."

"Quite understand!" Billy Kane forced a sarcastic smile. "You are almost too considerate!"

She broke the silence, her voice cool and even: "I left it entirely to you as to whether you would come over to this table here or not."

"Quite understand!" Billy Kane forced a sarcastic smile. "You are almost too considerate!"

She broke the silence, her voice cool and even: "I left it entirely to you as to whether you would come over to this table here or not."

"Quite understand!" Billy Kane forced a sarcastic smile. "You are almost too considerate!"



"Are they not?" Savnak's voice seemed tinged with bitterness. "The soul may be well fed, Vetter, but that does not keep one often enough from tightening the belt! I think I would be fortunate to make the exchange—my gift, such as it is, for your diamonds."

"Am I?" she said. Her eyes flashed suddenly. "Well, perhaps you are right! I have thought sometimes that even the chance I give you is more than you deserve. I feel so strongly about it, in fact, that the only thing which prevents me from putting an end to it—and you—by using you to defeat the ends of your own criminal asso-

ciates a great deal of good is being done. They will trap you sometimes, of course, and knowing them, you know what will happen, and I am satisfied then that, as an alternative, you would prefer Sing Sing and the chair; but you are clever—that is why you grasp at the chance I give you. You are extremely clever—and you believe you can

her shoulders suddenly—"you did very well last night. His life would not be worth very much if the underworld should ever lay hands on the man in the mask. Would it, Bundy?"

He did not answer her. "Yes, you did very well, indeed," she went on calmly. "You will meet somewhere else, of course, as soon as you can find a suitable place, but you will hold no more of your secret council meetings at Jerry's for some time to come."

Billy Kane's face was impassive now. He was apparently intent only on the thin blue spiral of smoke that curled upward from the tip of his cigarette. So those meetings of that cursed directorate of crime had been held at Jerry's, had they? He had not known that.

"Suppose," suggested Billy Kane curtly, "that we come to the point. What is it that you want to-night?"

"I am coming to the point," she answered levelly. "Owing to the events of last night your organization is in confusion, some of the more faint-hearted of your partners have tempora-

ly even taken to their heels; but, even so, the organization's activities can hardly come to an abrupt standstill. You will perhaps remember a somewhat similar occasion once before? There are perhaps certain matters that are imperative, that cannot wait. Is it not so, Bundy? And in such an emergency it is left to—shall we call him the organization's secretary?—to keep things going. Personal touch is lost with one another, but there is still a way. I know, it does not matter how, that Red Vallon received a written order a little while ago. I followed Red Vallon here. I think he gave that order to you."

Billy Kane looked at her for a moment, a quizzical, whimsical expression creeping into his face. She was in deadly earnest, he knew that well. And yet there was a certain sense of humor here, too—a grim humor, with something of the sardonic in it, and nothing of mirth. Red Vallon's code order was quite as meaningless to him as it would be to her!

"Sure!" said Billy Kane, alias the Rat—and chuckled. "Sure, he gave it to me! You don't think I'd hold anything out on you, do you? Sure, he gave it to me!" He tossed the paper across the table toward her. "Help yourself! All you've got to do is ask for anything I've got, and it's yours. You're as welcome as the sunshine to it."

She studied it for an instant, calmly. Billy Kane, watching her narrowly, frowned slightly in a puzzled way. She appeared to be neither agitated nor confused. She raised her eyes to his, a glint half of mockery, half of menace, in their brown depths.

"Did you think I did not know it was in cipher?" she inquired coldly. "You would hardly have been so obliging otherwise, would you? It is always in cipher under these circumstances, isn't it? Well, what is the translation?"

"Red Vallon didn't tell me," said Billy Kane complacently. "Quite probably not!" she countered sharply. "It was hardly necessary, was it? But since you have decoded it yourself?"

Billy Kane shrugged his shoulders. "I've been away so long," he said, "that I've forgotten the key."

"Really?" She was smiling at him in derision now. "In other words, you refuse to tell me what it is."

"Don't you think you expect a little too much from me?" He asked softly. "You are not as bright this evening as usual. I know that some crime is planned and set forth here on this paper. It really makes no vital difference to

me to know beforehand specifically just what that crime is, for if it succeeds I shall know about it, and, in that case, I shall equally know that you did not prevent it. I think you quite understand what that means, don't you, Bundy? However—she smiled again, as she opened her purse and took out a pencil—"let us put it down to a woman's insatiable curiosity. If you like, and decide together."

"Decide it!" The twisted smile that came to his lips was genuine enough. He couldn't decide it. He had only one card to play—a flat and unequivocal refusal. "Nothing doing!" he snarled. "Oh, yes, I think there is," she said softly again.

He stared at her. Her pencil was flying across the paper. Who was this woman? She knew the key! Was there anything that she did not know? He watched her in a stunned way, his mind in confusion. And then he leaned forward to observe her work more closely. Beneath the original cipher she had written this:

It is so simple, Bundy," she murmured caustically. "The numerals to designate the number of letters in the words, the transposition of 'a' for 'b' and so on, and the words spelled backward. It is so simple, Bundy, that it is strange you should have forgotten—and forgotten that there are other secrets I have found in that den of yours, apart from that very convenient and ingenious door!"

She was working as she spoke, paying no attention to him. He made no reply, only watched her as she set down a second series of letters:

Dutchy Vetter received assignment diamonds ten thousand dollars to-day from Amsterdam. Have information the Mole is laying a plant to get them to-night between eight and nine o'clock, and divert suspicion to some one else. Run the Mole to earth and make his cough up.

She was studying the paper in her hand. Billy Kane lit another cigarette. He was still watching her, but it was in a detached sort of way. Between eight and nine o'clock! Peters was rarely able to leave the Ellsworth home on his evenings off until well after eight o'clock; Peters, therefore, would not reach his flat much before nine, and was not likely to leave there again immediately.

Billy Kane's mind was working in quick and seemingly unrelated snatches of thought. There was time enough to see this Vetter game through without interfering with that interview he meant to hold with Peters. . . . It was strange that it should be Vetter.

White Jack had spoken of Vetter. Savnak, the violin player, and Vetter and Vetter spent most of their evenings together at Vetter's playing pinochle and the violin. . . . Savnak would likely be there then between eight and nine. . . . Upon whom was it that the so-called Mole intended to point suspicion? Here was the moral obligation again.

He had fought that out last night. . . . She, this woman here, was not the driving force. . . . She only represented disaster from an entirely different source if he failed. . . . If he stood aside with the foreknowledge of crime in his possession he was as guilty as this Mole. . . . Perhaps he had been trying to trick his own conscience in not pressing Red Vallon for explanations. . . . Perhaps, in a measure, he had allowed the argument that he might invite Red Vallon's suspicions to act as an excuse for evading the responsibility that this foreknowledge of crime entailed. . . . Well, that responsibility was his now, thanks to her. . . . He had no choice. . . . It was likely to be the man in the mask again, and—

"Perhaps you would like to destroy this—for safety's sake," she observed complacently. He took the paper mechanically, and mechanically tore it up. "I do not know the Mole personally"—she was speaking almost more to herself than to him, as though feeling her way cautiously along a tortuous mental path—"I only know him as an exceedingly clever scoundrel, and as the head of a small but very select band of criminals. He is a sort of competitor of yours, I believe, and more than once has had the temerity to act as a thorn in the side of your own rapacious and diabolical crime trust. But I do know that this Vetter is an honest old man. It would be too bad"—her voice, still low, was suddenly vibrant with a significance there was no

Continued on Next Page